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The (Im)Possibility of Growing up in Giorgio Bassani's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*

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In the second edition of *The Way of the World*, Franco Moretti claims that the end of the First World War marked the end of the European, thus also Italian, novel of formation. A successful maturation of the individual, according to Moretti, is not possible after the experiences of the war, as the individual has become disintegrated and unable to grow up. The genre thus loses its credibility and cohesion (233). It is also deprived of its pedagogical and moralistic function. Other scholars, however, disagree with Moretti, claiming rather that the First World War has reinvigorated the theme by including war experience into the narratives (Neubauer 118). Engaging with this debate, in this paper, I will investigate whether the coming-of-age novels persisted in post-war Italy, and if so, what kind of process of growth they represent. By analyzing one of the most popular Italian novels of the 1960s – Giorgio Bassani's *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* – I will bring to light a type of sentimental initiation to see if it concludes the protagonist's process of maturation. I will start my discussion with a brief theoretical introduction of the term Bildungsroman, and then proceed with a close analysis of the selected text.

The German term Bildungsroman derives from the word *bildung*, which means shaping, formation, and the word *roman*, which is translated as the novel (Buckley 14). *A Glossary of German Literary Terms* defines it as a type of novel “in which the centre of interest is to be found not so much in adventures of a hero [. . .] as in the effects which his experience are seen to have in his growth to maturity and clarity of purpose, after perhaps fumbling beginnings” (Herd 39). Ilaria Masenga notices that when the transformation process is completed, the hero changes from a passive subject in a state of self-ignorance into an active one that is self-conscious (12). Bildungsroman refers to a variety of novels that may depict the whole life of a protagonist or just only few years or a crucial moment of his life.

The novel I wish to discuss in this paper, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, focuses only on those few years of the protagonist's life that are most important for his personal growth. Following Bakhtin's classification, *Il giardino* can be considered a historical type of Bildungsroman in which the main character not only grows up through the life experience, but he also understands his own identity through the historical events that transform his personality.¹ Douglas Radcliff-Umstead defines the novel as a “Bildungsroman in retro-

1 Bakhtin distinguishes five types of “the novel of human emergence” (21). The first one depicts a man's entire life- from childhood to old age and focuses on internal changes of his personality throughout life. Bakhtin calls it a cyclical novel that is age-orientated. Another type of a cyclical novel is the one that presents life as an experience and shows the development of “youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality” (22). The third type is of biographical nature. Here the protagonist's maturity is acquired throughout different life activities, work and changing circumstances. The subsequent, fourth type is the didactic-pedagogical model of human emergence where education of a young protagonist plays a key role in his maturation process.

spect, where the narrator relates the story of his maturation through the knowledge that came with learning the secrets of the garden" (523). Although Paolo Possiedi states that the coming-of-age process for all main protagonists (the narrator, Micòl, Alberto, and Malnate) is interrupted, or even prevented by the historical events that make the maturation impossible to be achieved (108), I would like to claim that in case of the narrator, the maturation does occur after all.

Il giardino is Bassani's most famous novel. In 1962, it won the Viareggio prize, and a few years later it was adapted into a very successful movie by the celebrated Italian director Vittorio De Sica, who with this film won the fourth of his Academy Awards. The novel describes the situation of Italian Jews under fascism, through the story of the lives of its four young protagonists. From the first pages of the novel, the reader can assume that the narrator, who writes reflectively from the perspective of 20 years later, is the only one who survived the war. Although the reader can only be certain of the Finzi-Contini's death, the lack of narrator's comments on the postwar life of the other members of the narrator's family or friends may suggest that they have not survived the war. Although some of the events that he recounts date back to 1929, the nameless narrator focuses mainly on a couple of years of his youth, between 1938–1940.² Those years, in which the narrator is in his early 20s, are crucial for his personal development.

The most important figure for the narrator's sentimental growth is Micòl Finzi-Contini – a girl from a Jewish family with aristocratic tastes and manners. Harry Davis distinguishes four stages of the "experiencing I" development that occur thanks to Micòl. Following his division, those begin: "from his [narrator's] 1929 encounter with Micòl and boyish sexual fantasies in the subterranean chamber outside the garden wall (Part I), to the idyllic exploration of the garden (Part II), the onset of 'disagio, amarezza

Finally, the last type, according to Bakhtin the most important one, is a historical one when a protagonist finds himself on the threshold between different historical eras, he "emerges along with the world and he reflects the historical emergence of the world itself. He is no longer within an epoch, but on the border between two epochs, at the transition point between from one to another" (23).

- 2 The following paper focuses only on one of Bassani's novel, however, it is crucial to briefly mention at this point the formation and growth of the main protagonist (the nameless narrator) across Bassani's two other novels that together with *Il Giardino* form a trilogy included in *Romanzo di Ferrara*, namely, *Gli occhiali d'oro* (The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles) and *Dietro la porta* (Behind the Door), which respectively constitute chapter two and four of the *Romanzo di Ferrara* series. The first appearance of the first person protagonist/narrator takes place in *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*. Here the narrator shifts slowly from third to first person: at first he uses the "voice of the people" by citing common truths and opinions, then he identifies himself with that voice by using the plural we. Finally, at the end of the novel the narrator speaks with his own voice. He is not one of the students but he is the student, the Jew, and at last the writer. The three novels illustrate the narrator's growth and show his *Bildung*, during which he has accepted and acknowledged his sense of incompleteness and otherness. This long and painful journey starts with *The Gold-Rimmed Spectacles*, continues through *The Garden of Finzi-Contini's* and finally completes with *Behind the Door* where the protagonist not only accepts but freely chooses his role of an outcast. As Paolo Vanelli notices, the metatextual level of the trilogy is the story of formation of the author himself – at first the author can be seen in some of his characters and then he himself becomes the protagonist (75). For more reference on the topic see: *The Same And/Or Different: Narcissism and Exile in Giorgio Bassani's Novels* and *The Drama of Assimilated Jew: Giorgio Bassani's Romanzo di Ferrara* by Lucienne Kroha and *Il cerchio spezzato* by Paolo Vanelli.

e dolore' and the surrogate role of visits to the 'Barchetto del Duca' (Part III), and finally the culminating scene in Micòl's room followed by suffering and eventual release (Part IV)" (120).

The narrator talks to Micòl for the first time when he is thirteen. After having failed his mathematics exam, afraid of his parents' anger and disappointment, he wanders around the city walls on his bicycle considering never coming back home. He stops close to the Finzi-Contini's property when he hears someone calling him. It is Micòl. Though he knows exactly who she is, as he has seen her in the synagogue and at school during the final exams, he has never spoken to her: "It was the first time she had spoken to me. Moreover: it was the first time, practically, that I had heard her speak" (31).³ Micòl invites the narrator to climb over the walls and to enter the garden. This event marks the first stage on the narrator's road towards his sentimental growth. Though at first undecided, shortly after he agrees to hide his bicycle in a close-by cave and to enter the Finzi-Contini's garden. From the very first moment, he is attracted by Micòl's blond, Nordic-looking hair and by her large, light eyes (50). When he enters the cave, the anxiety takes over. He is imagining kissing Micòl on the lips. The possibility of a physical contact with Micòl is, however, disturbing the narrator's calm. Renato Napoli notices that the sexuality, at this stage, is perceived with anxiety, it is "pericolo maggiore" ("the greatest risk," Bassani 60) that a boy of his age may encounter. The time of the initiation has thus not come yet (Napoli 480). When the narrator leaves the cave he realizes that Micòl has been called home and left. The narrator has to wait another nine years to enter the "enchanted garden."⁴ However, as Marilyn Schneider notices, "Micòl has already been able to guide him a little; she has, by her ironic belittling of his problem, relieved his misery by increasing his self-awareness" (55), which is illustrated by the narrator's recognition that "the question of being flunked had become secondary, a childish matter that would work itself out" (32).⁵

Their second encounter takes place nine years later, in 1938, two months after the introduction of the racial laws. Those laws had a major impact on the everyday life of Italian Jews. For example, they forbade mixed marriages, excluded Jewish children from public schools, and banned Jews from military service (Maternini 150–64). Those persecutions affect directly the narrator, who is now a student of Literature and Art History at the University of Bologna. He is expelled from the tennis club that he has attended for years, he cannot use the city library resources, and his brother has to go to France to study at the University. The narrator is angry and disappointed with the new reality, yet still he seems not to be fully aware of the future implications of those new decrees. Micòl is the first to understand the hopelessness and tragedy of the situation in which they, as Italian Jews, find themselves. The girl senses that the future might never come. She believes that what one should do is worship the past and live by the day. "Micòl's

3 This and the following translations of *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* are by William Weaver. "Era la prima volta che mi rivolgeva la parola. Di più: era la prima volta, in pratica, che la sentivo parlare" (50).

4 The expression "enchanted garden" was used by Sacha Talmor in her article under the same title, published in *The European Legacy*.

5 "D'un tratto m'ero accorto che la questione della bocciatura era diventata secondaria, una faccenda bambinesca che si sarebbe sistemata da sè" (52).

zeal for the present is the other side of her awareness of life's end in death. Even in her disdain for the future, there seemed to be, according to the narrator, a presentiment of her own and her family's coming death" (Schneider 46). She is committed to the present and refuses the future: "Micòl repeated constantly [. . .] that for the future, in itself, was something she detested, preferring to it by far '*le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*,' and, even more, the past, the dear, sweet, sainted past" (200).⁶

Thanks to Micòl, the narrator gains a better understanding of himself but also of the historic moment they live in. When they hide from the storm in a shed where an old carriage is kept, she teaches the narrator an important lesson about the new reality that history has imposed on them. As Joann Cannon observes, the carriage is a point where the story of the two protagonists intersects with the history of the Italian Jews. "The unused carriage symbolizes the loss of function of the Jews in Italy" (128). Micòl's increasing realization of the lack of future for the Italian Jewish community brings the narrator closer to the truth about their own fate. Micòl understands that under fascism, the two young Jews cannot plan their future. She knows that their relationship is now "useless." Death is unavoidable and they cannot pretend to live in an illusory reality: "Objects also die, my friend. And if they also must die, then that's it, better to let them go. It shows far more style, above all. Don't you agree?" (79).⁷

This realization makes Micòl reject the narrator's love. She assumes the role of his guide through the painful maturation process. Giusi Oddo De Stefanis compares her to Dante's Beatrice, who accompanies the hero in the journey of self-consciousness (126–8). Bassani, like Dante, gave his female protagonist superhuman characteristics. In Dante's poems, Beatrice embodies semi-divine attributes; she is often compared to an angel, an unearthly creature. Micòl also has almost supernatural features. Marilyn Schneider compares her to Demeter – the goddess of harvest as she represents the principle of both life and death. "She [Micòl] does so in purely human terms, as a twentieth-century existential type, and she does so also as a superhuman figure, a kind of Earth Mother whose realm both fructifies and shelters the dead" (53). Throughout the novel, she brings the narrator closer to self-recognition and self-awareness. He is attracted by the girl from their very first meeting, however, he is too afraid to reveal his feelings. By neutralizing the sexual tension between the two of them, he shows his immaturity and inability to create a valid relationship. When he finally decides to kiss the girl, she stands still, like a statue. It is already too late for the kiss to come. As Harry Davis observes, at this moment, the narrator comes to realize his "prevailing weakness," which is "inertia and irresolution" (123). He understands that his prolonged passivity destroyed the possible relationship with Micòl. At the end of the novel, thanks to his father, he also acknowledges Micòl's reasons for rejecting a romantic relationship between the two of them. Here, the father completes Micòl's role as a guide, explaining to the narrator the impossibility of a love affair. Micòl will soon become a faded memory for him, but thanks to this experience the narrator

6 "Micòl ripeteva di continuo [. . .] che il futuro, in sé, lei lo abborriva, ad esso preferendo di gran lunga '*le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*,' e il passato, ancora di più, il caro, il dolce, il *pio* passato" (241).

7 "Anche le cose muoiono, caro mio. E allora, se anche loro devono morire, tant'è, meglio lasciarle andare. C'è molto più stile, oltre tutto, ti pare?" (95).

will feel enriched and also more mature. The father guides him back from the depths of despair into the maturity and manhood. He helps the narrator to achieve wisdom and to discover his conscious self of a grown up man by advising him not to “go there [to Finzi-Contini’s place] anymore, to their house. [. . .] It would be more manly, for one thing” (191).⁸ The tender embrace between the father and son symbolizes the narrator’s final acceptance of the painful reality, both emotional and historical. His maturation process is thus completed on two profoundly intertwined levels. The historical events are not separated from the narrator’s personal life; on the contrary, they deeply affect his love story with Micòl Finzi-Contini.

Although the novel does not end in the traditional manner, which in case of the 19th century Bildungsroman would be marriage, it does present the transformation of the main character into a self-conscious individual, fully aware of his personal weaknesses, his identity, and the tragic reality of his times. Valentina Mascaretti argues that there is no coming-of-age novel which does not present some problematic elements that could distance it from traditional patterns (34). In the case of Bassani’s novel, the unwanted emotional growth may cast doubt on the narrator’s coming-of-age process. However, the painful realization of the impossibility of having an actual relationship with Micòl raises the narrator’s self-awareness and leads him into adulthood. The growing up process is thus completed. To accept the girl’s refusal means to leave behind the adolescence infatuation, to accept the historical reality and to move toward maturity.

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8 “Non andarci più, a casa loro. [. . .] È più da uomo, fra l’altro” (231).

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Streszczenie

Włoski badacz literatury Franco Moretti w swoim szeroko cytowanym studium nad *Bildungsroman* twierdzi, że po wydarzeniach związanych z drugą wojną światową gatunek ten przestał istnieć w literaturze europejskiej. Analizując powieść jednego z najbardziej znanych włoskich pisarzy powojnia – Giorgia Bassaniego, niniejszy artykuł próbuje ustalić słuszność tej tezy. Przyglądając się procesowi dojrzewania głównego bohatera powieści *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, próbuję odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy niechciany, wręcz narzucony, proces formowania może być doświadczeniem kształtującym osobowość bohatera i pozwalającym mu wkroczyć w dorosłość. Artykuł zaczynam od krótkiego wprowadzenia teoretycznego na temat *Bildungsroman*, a następnie przystępuję do analizy tekstu.